

***Contemporary Performing Arts on  
the Tibetan Plateau and amongst Tibetans:  
Reflections on Transformation, Authenticity and Value***

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This paper discusses the often stated assumption that the traditional Tibetan performing arts are disappearing amongst Tibetans living in the People's Republic of China (PRC), as a result of their being "sinicized" and further more dictated by national politics (Norbu 1986, Adams 1996, Ross 1995). In an attempt to be the guardians of the Tibetan performing arts, Tibetans in exile have established cultural institutions, where performing arts are preserved and maintained, strictly adhering to tradition. However, as Tibetan culture in exile is exposed to Hindi films and music and also western-style music, it too, is subject to the influences of cultural changes. The issue is that Tibetan performing arts, both in Tibet and in exile, are influenced by changes which depending on the perceiver (i.e., scholars, political groups or Tibetans) might be regarded as detrimental to the culture itself. Based on the observation of selected contemporary performances within the institutional, private, and public spheres on the Tibetan plateau, this paper questions as to who holds a claim to a cultural authority over "authentic" contemporary Tibetan culture. Should transformation and reinvention of traditions be seen negatively as an expression of loss or positively as a gain of intercultural values?

In 2007 and 2009 I made several trips to the Tibetan plateau, more specifically Qinghai and Tibet (TAR), working as a tour guide with groups of Danish tourists. I am familiar with these regions from former journeys, but my previous trips were of a personal or scholarly nature – part of anthropological fieldwork with a larger time frame and the possibility to stay with local people looking closely into chosen subjects. However, travelling with a group of tourists provided me with a new and different insight, as I now had to experience familiar places and setups from a different perspective, seen through the eyes of a tourist, unfamiliar with and having little or no knowledge of Tibetan culture. In connection with my job of showing my group the aspects of Tibetan culture, I on and off consulted my local Tibetan guide for updated information. While in Lhasa, my local Tibetan guide informed me of a "Tibetan show" (to quote his words) performing every evening at a huge theatre hall in Lhasa. I agreed that we bring the tourist group to the show, and watching this show initiated a chain of thoughts regarding Tibetan performances and ethnic values. Consequently, this paper is not a thoroughly scholarly study of contemporary Tibetan performing arts, but merely an attempt to encapsulate some of my

impressions and reflections on present day performing arts seen on the Tibetan plateau and amongst Tibetans in exile.<sup>1</sup>

### 1. Traditional Lha mo Performances

Among the Tibetans who fled Tibet in 1959 and settled in exile in India, a specific concern was to preserve the rich cultural heritage of Tibet. The disappearance of Tibetan culture in Tibet under Chinese occupation and the influence of the cultures of the host countries, i.e., India, Nepal and various others, were seen as legitimate threats to Tibetan culture in exile (Norbu 1986). With the aim to preserve the transmission of traditional Tibetan dance and opera, the Tibetan government-in-exile under the leadership of the Dalai Lama founded the Amnye Machen Institute (AMI) and the Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts (TIPA) (formerly named *Zlos gar*) (Norbu 2001). Tibetan performing arts are classified in three divisions:

1. Gar – ceremonial music and dance performed at the court of the Dalai Lama by young boys
2. 'Cham – dances performed by monks at specific occasions in monasteries
3. Lha mo – the classical Tibetan Opera (Ross 1995: 4)

Subjects for studies and performance for students at TIPA are dance and opera such as Lha mo, Gar, and Nang ma stod gzhas (music of Lhasa and Shigatse) (Norbu 1986: 5, 2001).

The origination of Lha mo is accredited to Thang stong rgyal po (1361–1485), although there is a lack of literary documentation for this (Gyatso 1986: 92). Thang stong rgyal po is known as a scholar-saint and was admired for his excellence and energy in many disciplines. In order to benefit all sentient beings, he built bridges over the main rivers in Tibet, and with the aim of gaining support for his projects he trained some of his female workers as singers while he accompanied them on drum and cymbals (Ross 1995:12). The troupe would then tour in Central Tibet, and as the female singers sang in a high-pitched tone they were named *lha mo* (goddesses) by the local audience (*ibid.*). The traditional Tibetan “opera or theatre”, Lha mo, has fixed rules and strict traditional choreography, with specific characters performing in specific situations. Performances are based on stories passed down through generations from roving bards (*sgrung mkhan*) in Tibet, who could sing and recite epics and narratives (*kha bshad*) which lasted for days, narratives and stories about Tibet’s history, Buddhism and legends. By the 19th century, Lha mo was found

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Ashu Conrad for additional information regarding performances with Tibetans in exile.

throughout Tibet, with amateur troupes performing for the local community throughout the year (Ross 1995: 18).

Some Western scholars, as well as Tibetans in exile, are of the opinion that Tibetan culture is disappearing and has been destroyed under the Chinese communist rule in Tibet (Norbu 1986: 5, Adams 1996: 521). According to Jamyang Norbu "...the old performing traditions are now dead in Tibet...its musical instruments, masks and costumes destroyed, there has, on the other hand, been a systematic and wholesale perversion of Tibetan folk songs, dances and operas to serve as vehicle for Communist propaganda and a buttress for racist and pseudo historical claims" (Norbu 1986: 5). Although Jamyang Norbu's observations refer to the massive state propaganda during and in the period following the Cultural Revolution, most western observers and Tibetan scholars (in exile) agree that present Lha mo performance in Tibet at the annual Zho ston Opera Festival of Lhasa which was revived in 1986, reveals a Chinese assimilation of the Tibetan performing arts, with sinicized vocalizing techniques influenced by the Beijing Opera (Norbu 1986, Diehl 1997, Calkowski 1997: 53, TIN 2004: 51, Henrion-Dourcy 2005) (Photo 1).

## 2. Historical Reflections

Transitions are also taking place among the Tibetans in exile. Although the tendency within the exile community seems to be "stay the same", TIPA has nonetheless given space to alter their performances to accommodate a Western audience by changing the eight-hour performances to a two-hour performance of the Tibetan Lha mo opera, this time span being more appealing to Western taste, as well as allowing the hero and heroine to embrace on-stage, which is quite unlike the traditional Lha mo opera (*cf.* Calkowski 1997: 55, Conrad 2007).

Within the Buddhist religious traditions there is likewise recognition of the global arena as a performance marketplace for display and consumption. Exile Tibetan monks perform their dance tradition "*'cham*" on the global stage for western audiences and are entering the global cultural marketplace in order "to display their culture, promote their religious traditions and to raise funds for their monasteries" (Schrempf 1997: 92). This is a very "flexible" approach, since performing *'cham* dances on secular stages outside the monastic context is not in accordance with tradition. While monks perform *'cham* in a Western context, "the audience expect a most 'authentic' presentation of 'sacred dance', merely watching the monks performing segments of complex movements stripped of their ritual context" (Schrempf 1997: 100). These facts add fuel to the heated discussion of "authenticity" – on what terms and by whom can it be decided what is genuinely authentic or not?

Since the 1950s Tibetan drama has been performed by "Chinese groups" or by Tibetans taking part in Chinese-dominated dance troupes. Training of

minority artists took place already in 1951, when the Central Institute for Nationalities was established in Beijing. The institute also undertook research on “minority cultures”, and an arts department was set up in 1959 (TIN 2004: 34, Adams 1996). In October 1976, the PRC announced its intention to send a dance and drama troupe known as the Lhasa Doegar of Tibet on a tour to Nepal, Japan and Switzerland (Calkowski 1997: 54, Tibetan Review 1978: 6). In 1991, China’s Sichuan Song and Dance Ensemble gave a performance in Delhi. At the Zaxi Luge Tibetan Dance Group, during their 1992 North America tour, the artists “wore Chinese theatrical makeup, offered sinicized vocalizing and acrobatic manoeuvres, and displayed female artistes in diaphanous *chu-pa* adorned with glittering sequins” (Calkowski 1997: 55). They performed in this style since “... for a Tibetan performer to gain professional status and prestige, he or she had to win recognition at an important annual competition in Beijing” (Calkowski 1997: 55). In May 1994, the Chinese Tibet Art Troupe visited Austria and Sweden, and in August 1994, the Tibetan Folk Ensemble of Kyigodo, formerly a part of Kham, performed in Japan (*ibid.*). Since the 1990s government dance troupes are increasingly expected to raise their own funds through performances rather than existing from state stipends, although a practice of using minority folk music as inspiration and basis remains fashionable (TIN 2004: 40). The following is an account of a present-day Chinese theatre troupe using Tibetan folk music and tales as a base for its performances in the commercialized marketplace.

### 3. Institutional Sphere

#### 3.1 The Show O<sub>2</sub> – Himalaya

Owned by China Travel Service (CTA) the ensemble “Tibet Shengdi Heaven Creation Entertainment Co. Ltd.” performs the “Show O<sub>2</sub> – Himalaya” at a huge theatre hall in Lhasa. The title “O<sub>2</sub> – Himalaya” presumably takes its name from the free-oxygen-supplied theatre where the performance takes place, conveniently for newly-arrived tourists and notably for the numerous artists performing physically demanding stunts during the entire show. The show is presented as “A grand Tibetan song-dance audio-visual epic”, “A dazzling Tibetan song and dance feast” (Himalaya n.d.).

The “Show O<sub>2</sub> – Himalaya” “is a musical and acrobatic journey into the ancient Guge kingdom with 700 years of history” (*ibid.*). The producer explains: “Based on the essence of Tibet traditional songs and dances, we have added exceptional acrobatic performances matched with high-technology stage sets and state-of-the art lighting” (*ibid.*). Using many adjectives the synopsis writes: “The Show O<sub>2</sub> – Himalaya will lead you to go through the splendid world of Tibetan people, to enter the glorious Guge Kingdom, to join the colourful festivals of the snow land, and finally gathering in Lhasa and sharing the hope of Beijing 2008 Olympic: One world, One Dream” (*ibid.*).

The Show O<sub>2</sub> – Himalaya is a Chinese performance with a blend of “cultural borrowing” from partly Western, but mainly Tibetan culture, using icons from traditional Tibetan culture.<sup>2</sup> The actors perform incredible stunts, acrobatic manoeuvres and dance performances, mainly based on domestic situations from traditional Tibetan daily life and routines, like female dancers “churning butter”, as well as using Buddhist rituals and items (Photo 2). Altogether the impressions of many Tibetan cultural aspects are reinvented into a spectacular musical dance show. Being a Chinese theatre company, the opportunity is also taken to highlight a Chinese agenda of national pride, such as the event of the Beijing 2008 Olympic with the waving of the Chinese flag and a scene with the railway to Lhasa which was opened in 2006, in case these events should have missed the attention of the audience.<sup>3</sup>

The Show O<sub>2</sub> – Himalaya is loaded with a popularised mythological symbolism and a romanticised portrayal of Tibetans as a homogenous, beautiful and harmonious part of China’s “minority” population. Fantasies are fuelled with images of historical beauty with references to the ancient Guge kingdom. Here we see Tibetan culture commoditized for mass-consumption in the marketplace of culture using the picture of an ongoing fabled Shangrila image (*cf.* Bishop 1989). Emerging out of the particular context of Tibetan Buddhism and the monastic life are scenes with slim and sexy female dancers in high heels with hand-held drums (*lag mnga*), where dance movements are altered to conform modern styles of Chinese and “westernized performance” (Photo 3). The Buddhist objects used in this context can be linked with Appadurai’s concepts of how a recontextualization of decontextualized objects are given an added new value, i.e., “commoditization by diversion, where value is accelerated or enhanced by placing objects and things in unlikely contexts” (Appadurai 1997: 28).

The Show O<sub>2</sub> – Himalaya appears to be a Chinese consumption of Tibetan culture with “past imaginings delivered in present perceptions” and copying and reversing the original according to theatrical convenience. In the eyes of the organizers, Tibetan culture and identity are presented in a hybridizing feature of what constitutes contemporary Tibet (*cf.* Himalaya n.d.). A popular theme in the traditional Lha mo performances was seeing the hero or heroine presented as a deity in the form of a bodhisattva, who would manifest on earth for the benefit

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<sup>2</sup> The Tibet Shengdi Heaven Creation Entertainment co. Ltd. uses the female deity in the form of a Dākinī icon (Dorje Pakmo, The Diamond Sow, Skr. Vajravarahi, tib. *mKha' 'gro*) as their business trade mark.

<sup>3</sup> Here the train is nicknamed “the magical Iron Yak” (Himalaya n.d.), somehow resembling it with the well known prophesy of the “Iron Bird”. “When the iron bird flies and the horse run on wheels, the Tibetan people will be scattered like ants, and the Dharma will travel west to the land of the red men” (Padmasambhava, the eighth century AD).

of all sentient beings (Ross 1995: 30). Likewise, in the Show O<sub>2</sub> – Himalaya there are scenes with beautiful dancing goddesses emphasizing wisdom and compassion. Several scenes show the splendid golden palace of the Guge kingdom, represented with a wide staircase, which is more like a replica of the imperial entrance at the emperors' palace as seen in the Forbidden City, Beijing, quite unlike the shape of former traditional Tibetan forts (Photo 4).

The traditional Chinese view of Tibetans and other minorities as “backward” are replaced by a romanticized view of minorities with enhancing diversity, admiration and fascination, for their culture which serves the purpose of the state (*cf.* TIN 2000: 29). Only two Tibetans are among the creative organizing crew, and out of the 61 performers 11 are Tibetan. My local guide referred to the Show O<sub>2</sub> – Himalaya as “The Tibetan show”. However, after seeing it I quickly renamed it “The Chinese show.” Yet, “who are to possess claims to cultural authority and according to whose criteria is it developed, and whose is it to develop” (TIN 2004: 40).

## 4. Private Sphere

### 4.1 Music and Nangma Bars

Within the private sphere at urban locations other scenes for contemporary Tibetan performing art are to be found at the various Karaoke and Nangma bars.<sup>4</sup> Nangma bars started around 1998, and have since then spread on the Tibetan Plateau, with several bars in major cities like Lhasa, Xining, the capital of Qinghai, Chengdu in Sichuan and Beijing, as well as in other minor cities. Nangma bars were originally drinking houses in Lhasa where traditional songs Nang ma stod gzhas were performed (TIN 2004, Morcom 2007, Norbu 1986). Singers performing at Nangma bars are paid for their performance and are expected to master a showy, professional, stage performance (*cf.* Morcom 2007, TIN 2004). Many Tibetan singers and performers have begun and are maintaining their careers at Nangma bars, but Nangma bars also employ Chinese singers and dancers. Songs are performed in both Chinese and Tibetan, however studies by Morcom (2007) state that in general only 5–10 percent are traditional Tibetan music, while probably 80 percent are Chinese language songs in all except the smallest Nangma bars (Morcom 2007: 15). With some live music, it is a mixture of traditional and modern Tibetan music, Chinese music, Western music, and also Hindi film songs are played (TIN 2004: 78). The repertoire is usually a separation of song and dance, as singers usually perform in the body language statically with frozen hand gestures. Dance troupes with male dancers might perform while holding a replica of the Tibetan lute (*sgra snyan*) or the two-stringed fiddle (*pi wang*).

In a rapidly changing world, the various Nangma bars on the Tibetan Plateau face the challenge of balancing between traditional roots and the modern

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<sup>4</sup> For the issue of Karaoke bars see Adams 1996 and TIN 2004.

expressions. Clothing is also a mixture of regional styles of dress from various places on the Tibetan plateau, as well as modern and traditional Chinese style, with a freedom to reinvent dresses with popular Buddhist symbols. What could be seen as clearly demand for modernization, well suited to his westernized jeans one of the singers in a Nangma bar uses the Vajra on his vest as a back mark, in a style fully leaving a HA (Hells Angels) back mark as a pale icon (Photo 5). Often shows at Nangma bars take its inspiration from dance performances at the various grand horse festivals which take place in the nomadic areas during summer seasons. I recall a visit to a Nangma bar in Xining in 2007, where the show was dominated by the dancers wearing traditional Tibetan nomads' dress, while performers in the same show in 2009 would wear clothing more in the style of various Chinese minority groups.<sup>5</sup> The interior of the Nangma bars are often a happy blend of Tibetan, Chinese, Indian and Western styles.

The mixing and “cultural borrowing” in the performing art also takes place within the musical sphere. Claiming themselves to be the Tibet's first rock band, a Tibetan rock band from Lhasa with the name of Nam Chak (Sky Metal) (*gnam lcags*), also called Vajara Band released a CD in 2003 targeted for the urban youth culture (Yangdon Dhondup 2008: 301). The artists of Nam Chak write and perform their music in a general mixture of Tibetan and westernized styles, even sometimes adding a Chinese style. Their Tibetan musical style is easily recognizable by the use of the distinctive Tibetan lute *sgra snyan*. The repertoire on their album from 2007 in sound track no. 7 “Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow” (*kha seng, di ring, sang nyin*) freely uses a blend of musical traditions from Tibetan Buddhism (by singing in a tune like a Buddhist chant master *dbu mdzad*), Chinese (using the Chinese fiddle *er-hu* used in Beijing opera), and heavy Western rock tunes. What could be “surprising” to the Tibetan Buddhist ear is another of Nam Chak's sound tracks no. 11. “Birth and Death” (*skye dang 'chi*), where the full wording of the Buddhist Bodhicitta prayer is recited accompanied by heavy westernized rock music.

## 5. Public Sphere

### 5.1 Contests and the New Potala Palace Square by Evening

For Tibetans, the significance of the Potala palace in Lhasa is enormous, as it represents the abode of Avalokiteśvara, the bodhisattva considered to be the patron deity of Tibet, who, according to Tibetan belief, is embodied in the Dalai Lama.<sup>6</sup> From a modern perspective, Potala can be seen as a trade mark or

<sup>5</sup> The Nangma bars in Xining also used the འཇམ་མགོན་མགས་སེལ་འཇམ་མགོན་ icon as their Business trade mark.

<sup>6</sup> The Potala palace functioned as abode under the rule of the Dalai Lamas until the flight to India in 1959 of the 14th Dalai Lama, and it is named after the holy Mount Potala in South India. The construction of Potala began in 1645 during the reign of the Fifth Dalai Lama and was completed in 1694.

synonym for Tibet, and it is recognized as being one of the world's great architectural masterpieces. The Potala Zhol village in front of the Potala Palace was demolished in 1995, and the area was transformed to a huge square, "The New Potala Palace Square", often used as a military parade ground. Every evening it is possible to watch and take part in a commercialized public performance in the New Potala Palace Square with the entertainment of "dancing water fountains", i.e., where hundreds of water fountains are "dancing" in time to the ear-thundering tunes of, – not Chinese music – but "An der Schönen Blauen Donau" and excerpts from "Carmen" and other Spanish flamenco music. Visitors to the Potala Square, of course, include groups of Western tourists, but the square is mainly packed with Chinese tourists and business people. With strong spotlights on the Potala palace while the sun sets the scene is quite breathtaking, and all tourist groups I have taken there were really impressed by the scene. During my evenings at the square, I only saw few Tibetans present. Many Chinese tourists add to the spectacular scene by taking an active part – dancing in, out and under the streams of water pouring out from the fountains (Photo 6). Also present, but not dancing, is the inevitable and massive presence of Chinese guards and soldiers, who with their presence and daily ceremonial performance of raising the Chinese flag at the flagpole, make the square appear more like a replica of Tiananmen Square in the national capital, Beijing.

Transitions in the art of sculpture-making can also be seen at the annual Losar/spring sculpture contest in Kumbum monastery near Xining, the capital of Qinghai province. When I visited Kumbum monastery during the summer 2007, all the exhibited butter-sculptures were modelled in a traditional Tibetan style, resembling the artistic style used at Losar during Monlam festivities in Lhasa. On the contrary, the sculptures exhibited by the winners of the Losar/spring 2009 competition were made in an entirely Chinese style with small Confucius figures and Chinese-style Buddha figures with big bellies, all surrounded by Chinese-style flowers. Such seemingly political pressure of performing in a Chinese style in order to win the contest is also prevalent within the dance and singing performance contests (*cf.* Calkowski 1997, Morcom 2007).

## 6. Conclusion

The field of performing arts is transitory. This is certainly fortunate, as it would be rather depressing if it just stayed the same with no alternative development and vigorous creative innovation. Such initiatives can also be seen as a commoditization of culture, using a creative ability to "misplace", recontextualize and decontextualize objects, which gives space to new hybrid forms (*cf.* Appadurai, Korom & Mills 1991, Appadurai 1997, Douglas & Isherwood 1981). The comprehension and appreciation in watching the show depends on the perceiver and can be viewed from different perspectives. For me, with my

knowledge of Tibetan culture, my comprehension of the “Tibetan show” (The Show O<sub>2</sub> – Himalaya) was seeing Tibetan culture and cultural artefacts shown in an entirely Chinese and Westernized expression. For my tourist group, with a limited, general knowledge of Tibet, watching the show was an experience of Tibetan culture in a spectacular theatrical setting. For my Tibetan local guide and his friends, the show induced pride in seeing Tibetan culture and traditions presented in an impressive and spectacular setting thus promoting Tibetan traditions and culture to a wider audience (i.e., Chinese and Western tourists). The performance at the Show O<sub>2</sub> – Himalaya presents what some critics claim is now taking place on the Tibetan Plateau, where conflicting examples of blurred genres with strong “cultural borrowing” are destroying “authentic and original” art belonging to another culture (*cf.* Norbu 1986, 2001). However, the integrity of Tibetan culture among Tibetans in exile is exposed to and under influence of Indian and Western cultures, and therefore is changing as well (Adams 1997: 521).

The fact is, that on a cosmopolitan global scale “cultural borrowing” is seen and practised practically everywhere, including within the sphere of the performing arts. This raises the question whether an appropriate border needs to be drawn, and who has the right to make such a decision? Appadurai states that today’s global action is the tension between cultural homogenization and cultural heterogenization, and “...a homogenization argument on a small scale is more likely to have the fear of cultural absorption by a nearby culture rather than a globalised culture as Americanization” (Appadurai 1996: 32). Tibetans are few and easily outnumbered compared to ethnic Chinese, and this is where the issue becomes sensitive. If the reverse took place, no one might have objected, i.e., if a Tibetan theatre group performed a show with a strong “cultural borrowing” of objects and daily customs based on a Chinese culture. Is the Show O<sub>2</sub> – Himalaya an example of cultural assimilation and exploitation of Tibetan culture or should we just see it as yet another show in the spectacular imaginary world of theatre and performance? However, organizers of the Show O<sub>2</sub> – Himalaya claim that their show is Tibetan – maybe this is the actual issue at stake here? It seems that we have to relate to a so called “cultural borrowing” as it increasingly takes place globally. But in doing so it needs to be strongly emphasized and acknowledged on the part of the “borrower” that an “inspiration” taken from the cultural life of a colourful minority group is presented as being a transformed performance, and is not a performance done by the cultural minority group itself.

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***Videography***

*The Show O<sub>2</sub> – Himalaya. Grand Tibetan song-dance & audio-visual epic*. DVD/CD. A Tibet Shengdi Heaven Creation Entertainment Co. Ltd. Production. Produced by China Heaven Creation International Performing Arts Co., Ltd. ISRC CN-A50-07-0042-0/V.J6

***Discography***

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PHOTO 1: Shoton at Norbu Lingka in Lhasa  
Photo by Ellen Bangsbo (2004)



PHOTO 2: Female dancers 'churning butter'  
Photo courtesy: O<sub>2</sub> – Himalaya (Himalaya brochure)



PHOTO 3: Female dancers with hand held drums  
Photo courtesy: O<sub>2</sub>– Himalaya (Himalaya brochure)



PHOTO 4: The Guge Kingdom presented on a large staircase  
Photo courtesy: O<sub>2</sub>–Himalaya (Himalaya brochure)



PHOTO 5: Nangma bar male singer from behind with dorje as a back mark  
Photo by Ellen Bangsbo (2009)



PHOTO 6: The New Potala Palace Square at evening time  
Photo by Ellen Bangsbo (2009)